

The Fight Over Berlin's Charming Street Lights

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Is world heritage at threat in Berlin? If you think of historical monuments at risk of destruction, the orderly capital of one of the world's richest countries probably isn't the first location that might spring to mind. This month, however, the World Monument Fund has placed a key aspect of Berlin's historical fabric on its 2014 [World Monuments Watch List](#), which details examples of internationally valuable but threatened sites. It's not a palace, a park or a house that's at risk. It's the city's street lamps.

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Berlin has a reputation as one of Europe's more modern capitals, but there's actually part of the city's infrastructure that is positively Victorian: its gas lighting. The German capital is the most heavily gas-lit major city in the world, its 43,000 lamps making up more than half the total remaining public gas lanterns still in existence. Many of these lanterns are beautiful, ranging from elaborate [hydra-like candelabra dating](#) back to the 1890s to simple, single teardrops. They also shed an unusually warm, yellowish light, a little dim compared to most big cities, but soft and atmospheric, especially when there's fresh snow on the ground to intensify its glare.

While these lamps are popular, it seems they have to go. Over 4,000 of the gas lamps will be removed by the end of next year, with the remainder phased out by 2020. Berlin's government plans to refit city streets with more carbon efficient LED lights. In addition to consuming less power, LED lamps are also easily adapted to work with so-called "smart city" systems that might, for example, brighten or dim its beams depending on who is around nearby. This adaptability is one reason why similar LED lighting systems are being rolled out across the world's cities.



The changes are being fought with some fierceness, not just by the World Monuments Fund. Over 20,000 locals have signed a petition demanding that the lanterns stay, and protesters have formed human chains around one Berlin borough's town hall. Veteran actor Ilja Richter has even posed naked with a Berlin lamp to promote the preservationist's cause. Gas lamp lovers insist there are practical reasons for keeping things as they are. The Berlin Gas Lamp association [Gaslicht Kultur](#) believes that the cost of conversion may outweigh the benefits of LED lamps, which could take 17 to 18 years before the public sees any savings from their installation costs. They also maintain that the oxygen-free environment within gas lamps prevents their corrosion, giving them a lifespan of up to a century, compared to 40 years for their electric equivalents.

Defenders of LED lights (including Berlin's Greens) say they'll enable the city to cut 9,200 tons of carbon emissions over their lifespan, reduce bills and slash maintenance costs, increased by the scarcity of modern gas lamp manufacturers for replacement parts. Looking at the city's plans from outside, the anti-LED backlash seems a little mystifying. Yes, the 230 historically valuable gas lanterns the city has agreed to keep aren't that many. But while the main LED replacement is a modern light called [Jessica](#) (in a shape nonetheless similar to gaslights installed in the 1950s), many other gas lanterns will be replaced by LED counterparts that replicate their appearance fairly closely, as this [side by side photo comparison](#) shows. In 2009, a [pilot project](#) replaced eight historical lanterns outside Berlin's Town Hall with similar-looking LED lights without major public outcry.

So why the passionate response from gas lamp supporters? Put simply, Berlin has already lost so much old stuff that it can't lose any more without some sense of pain. For obvious reasons, Berlin isn't a place that has an immaculately preserved past, and the city's sense of history is often evoked as much by a sense of what's missing as what's present. That so many historic lanterns have survived redevelopment, bombing and partition, even on streets that are otherwise lined with post-World War II buildings, is something of a miracle, one that many do not want to see undone. LED light manufacturers have been striving to recreate the soft yellow light of gas lamps, but not everyone thinks they've got it right yet. Cost arguments can also seem a little hypocritical. While Berlin is getting rid of surviving historic features such as the lamps on cost grounds, it's also recreating a new version of a long demolished monument – its old castle – at a cost of [€590 million](#). The backlash is a useful reminder that, while we all want a lighter carbon footprint, many people are bound to older technologies for reasons as emotional and aesthetic as they are practical.